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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews "Slim Hopes: Advertising & The Obsession with Thinness," a 30-minute video produced by the University of Massachusetts' Media Education Foundation, which discusses America's compulsion with thinness. Although the format of the video is the traditional "talking head," over 120 print and television advertisements are used to emphasize the demoralizing, degrading, and life-threatening way that Americans look at food. The video is divided into seven sections: (1) Impossible Beauty; (2) the Waif Look; (3) Constructed Bodies; (4) Food and Sex; (5) Food and Control; (6) the Weight Loss Industry and (7) Freeing Imaginations. The video suggests that consumers as willing participants in the skullduggery of the advertising industry must take an active role in challenging the images on television, in movies, and in magazine advertising. Reviewer comments include that although the talking head nature of the video was bothersome, the message is powerful and important, and the research and conclusions seemed solid, although there were times when assumptions garnered from the research could be challenged. (AEF)

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A Review Of *Slim Hopes: Advertising & The Obsession With Thinness*

by Richard Couch

Abstract

The following is a review of *Slim Hopes: Advertising & The Obsession With Thinness*, a video by Jean Kilbourne produced by the Media Education Foundation. The video is divided into seven main parts and discusses America's compulsive behavior in our desire to be thin. This video is a wonderful tool for professionals in the communications and health fields.

Slim Hopes: Advertising & The Obsession With Thinness is a 30 minute video produced by the Media Education Foundation which is affiliated in some way with the University of Massachusetts. The video discusses America's compulsion with thinness.

The author and main "talking head" in the video is noted researcher Jean Kilbourne of the University of Massachusetts. She has also created another award winning video titled *Still Killing Us Softly*. Although the format of the video is the traditional "talking head," (obviously a video of a lecture Dr. Kilbourne presented to a group) she uses over 120 ads from print and television to emphasize the demoralizing, degrading and life-threatening way that we Americans look at food in our culture. A close look at these images often displayed in film, TV and magazines discloses our view of food as decadent or sexy, often leading young women to such eating disorders as anorexia and bulimia.

The video is divided into 7 sections including 1) Impossible Beauty, 2) The Waif Look, 3) Constructed Bodies, 4) Food and Sex, 5) Food and Control, 6) The Weight Loss Industry and 7) Freeing Imaginations. The content and examples from advertising are provocative and engaging. In Section 1, Dr. Kilbourne discusses the notion of female beauty and America's fascination (some would say compulsion not to mention time, energy, and money spent) with some "ideal" female beauty. Section 2 includes an explanation of the "waif look" that is represented by super models. This "super model" (just look at the words we use to explain these women) body type of tall, thin, broad shoulders and small hips excludes 95% of all women in the world. Dr. Kilbourne suggests that women are supposed to be pear shaped. This vision of women which modern advertising agencies promote may cause serious eating disorders and terrible self-concepts in young women. For example, 11.3% of college women have bulimia nervosa; 80% of 10-year-old 4th grade girls are already on a diet. The health implications are frightening. Eight million Americans, mostly women, suffer from anorexia or bulimia.

In Section 3, Kilbourne discusses sculpted bodies, what she calls the "voluptuous look." We Americans are obsessed with fitness and in many cases at the expense of our health, for example, the recent disclosure of leakage from silicon breast implants. This debilitating disorder is directly related to the desire of some women to be more voluptuous.

The food industry is the center of discussion in Section 4. Companies spend 36 billion per year in advertising. The cereal industry spends 20 times more on advertising their products than they do on making it. Food has become a way to escape and/or a way to alter one's mood. In some cases, food is even being marketed as a substitute for sex. As a further example, Section 5 demonstrates how advertisers combine food and the ability to control oneself. For example, "good girls" are those who don't eat. Some advertisements make women feel ashamed for eating; women who eat are too indulgent; they can eat diet or fat-free dessert and become less self-indulgent. Many women pick at their food when they eat in front of others, but

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binge later. The extreme of this control, according to Kilbourne, is the feeling that good girls keep all of their appetites under control. The assumption is that we all know girls who can't say no.

Section 6 is perhaps the longest section and discusses in-depth the weight loss industry. Advertisements are geared toward religious, moralistic language, even using such words as temptation, sin, and salvation. This industry knows that Americans have a terrible prejudice against fat people, especially women. Thirty years ago, the $33 billion diet business did not exist. Fifty percent of all women are on a diet at any one time in America. Seventy-five percent of statistically "normal" women think they are fat. The physical/medical damage is compounded by the fact that 98% of dieters who lose weight through commercial programs gain it back and more.

One other related factor addressed in the video is the connection between smoking and thinness. Ninety percent of all smokers start before they are age 16 and many women who smoke say they can't give it up because they will gain too much weight. What a strange paradox: Women are willing to continue smoking which they know damages their health rather than gain weight which is health threatening but which society says is uglier than smoking. This insidious public health problem is the focus of the last section of the video.

Kilbourne suggests that we as consumers and as willing participants in the skullduggery of the advertising industry must take an active role in challenging the images that we see on our TV screens, in our movies, and in our magazine advertising. In closing, Dr. Kilbourne points out that the #1 wish for most adult women is to lose weight. If we cannot address the root of the problem -- popular media advertising -- we are destined to continue to believe in the thinness mystique.

Although the talking head nature of this video bothered me, the message is powerful and important. The research and the conclusions reported seem solid although there were times when I wanted to challenge assumptions garnered from the research. The video is an important resource for anyone teaching media courses or health courses. It can be purchased from Media Education Foundation, 26 Center St., Northampton, MA 01060, (413)-586-4170. http://www.igc.apc.org/mef/mef.html. I also found the business to be very cooperative in sending preview copies.